

Heather Brown

Walking into the Unknown: Inquiry-Based Learning Transforms the English Classroom

When high school teacher Heather Brown created “space to learn *with* the students,” she found her classroom transformed. In advocating for inquiry-based learning, she details a research project that fully engaged her Native American students.

In the back of the room, Lilly takes notes on a documentary. Dana stops researching to jot down her thoughts. Mark helps Sean with citations. Eddie shows Allan how to use an index. Jenny walks around the room, asking students questions about teen drinking for her project. Nadine creates pie charts with Excel. On the Internet, Sherman researches statistics about bullying. Nina and Kara divide up sections for their project on Native American boarding schools. Lance takes notes on an essay about the controversial band Cannibal Corpse. Charlotte composes interview questions that she will ask an elder in her village concerning traditional ceremonies.

A year earlier, I would not have believed that the students could be so deeply engaged in learning. When I began a research unit with the sophomores and juniors the year before, it failed miserably. Much of that failure resulted from my inaccurate assumptions and an inappropriate approach, one that was not in sync with students’ needs or expectations. By creating the space to learn *with* the students, I could now appreciate the importance of using inquiry-based learning coupled with authentic audience in research-project design.

At Ha:sañ Leadership and Preparatory School—a bicultural, college-preparatory high school that serves primarily Tohono O’odham students—I face a unique situation. The majority of Ha:sañ students are extremely dedicated to their education; many ride a school bus two hours each way between the reservation and the school. Teachers have high expectations of the students, and the reverse is true as well. Our

students have come to expect a bicultural, experiential curriculum. When I introduce an assignment to the students, I need to show how it is pertinent to their lives: either preparing them for college or connected to Native culture or history.

When I began a research project on revolutions, I assumed it would be inherently interesting to the students because I believed that as Native American teenagers they would identify with people resisting oppression. However, rather than embrace this project, they resisted it. It was the longest semester, and most of my energy was used to motivate, push, and prod, leaving little energy to teach. Ultimately, the students’ projects were dry, disjointed, and not well written. They had not mastered the content or the research process. I realized that for students to stop resisting learning, I had to resist falling into traditional, teacher-centered, text-based methods.

Consequently, when planning for the following year, I knew I had to rethink how I taught research. My previous approach had failed, but I had to try again because research is a state standard that I am required to teach. More importantly, the skills are necessary for success in college. As a teacher at a college-preparatory school, teaching research skills has to be a priority. I had recently finished a yearlong teacher research institute through the Southern Arizona Writing Project.

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This experience taught me a variety of research skills and made me realize that, for me, research is interesting and exciting if it is authentic and meaningful. I needed to find a way to make research just as meaningful for students by moving beyond text-based research and utilizing more-authentic methods. I wanted students to interview community members, survey students, and think critically about the research they read. Because part of our school mission is for students to return to their communities and enact positive change, I wanted to foster in them necessary independent thinking and leadership skills. The project needed to push them beyond finding and rewording information to being educators themselves, not just taking a topic they already knew something about but digging deeper, looking at why it occurred or how to effect change.

Darder states, "If bicultural students are to become competent in the democratic process, they must be given the opportunities to experience it actively as it gradually becomes a part of their personal history" (*Culture* 67). Inquiry-based project learning provides

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such opportunities for *all* students. It allows teachers to "organize classroom relationships so that students can draw on and confirm those dimensions of their histories and experiences that are deeply rooted in the surrounding community . . . [to] create the conditions where students come together to speak, to engage in dialogue, to share their stories, and to struggle together within social relations that strengthen rather than weaken possibilities for active citizenship" (Giroux, qtd. in Darder, "Buscando" 327).

Inquiry-based learning allows students to be active creators of knowledge; to see each other as authorities; and to validate their experiences, culture and, ultimately, themselves.

For my students to be motivated to conduct research, they needed to investigate something connected to their experiences. They also needed to have a real audience for the project to be purposeful. I knew that many of them had an interest in computers, so I decided to make the project a Web page; the

technology would be an incentive, but the real audience it provided coupled with the opportunity to influence others would be the true motivator. Incorporating technology into the curriculum for the purpose of creating an artifact—as opposed to just utilizing it—can increase motivation and enhance learning (Simkins). The students could learn the design program by creating a personal page that included pictures, original writings and artwork, and other items that expressed their likes and backgrounds. They could then create a link to another Web page that would present their research project, which would be about some aspect of identity. Slowly, the project evolved in my mind and, as it emerged, it transformed my approach.

Little did I know that this process—conducting my own research and facilitating that of the students—would challenge my view of teaching by allowing me to stop resisting, to let go of the notion that I needed to be an expert on everything, and to embrace the idea that I could learn with the students. By researching together, we learned more than I ever expected.

The Project

The first day of the project, I wrote my original research question on butcher paper: "What happens when teachers and students learn together?" I explained that I, too, was conducting research. The students had just finished a jigsaw activity where they discussed possible research topics under the year's theme: identity. The class brainstormed together on a KWT chart (What do you know? What do you want to know? What do you think others need to be taught?). For each subcategory of identity (ethnic, cultural, teen/modern, social, and sexual/gender), they listed issues that were relevant to them. They asked why Native teens are losing their cultural identity, why teen pregnancy is so high in their state of Arizona, and so on. After formulating questions, one member of each group rotated to another "identity." After looking at the topics, they wrote down three that they were interested in pursuing, eventually narrowing them down to one research question. We then posted all of the questions around the room. Some students were interested in Tohono O'odham traditions: Why are traditional ceremonies important? How is traditional O'odham healing different

from modern medicine? Others were interested in issues affecting their communities: Why do people join gangs? Why is rap music blamed for violence? Why are so many girls unhappy with the way they look? Still others were concerned with historical events and their lasting effects: How did boarding schools change the way Native Americans are today? What happened at Wounded Knee? Why is Leonard Peltier still in prison?

After the students designed research questions, they created a KW chart for their topic. On one side of the T-chart, they wrote everything they knew about or had experienced in relation to their topic. On the other side, they composed questions that they would use to guide their inquiry.

The students employed electronic and textual sources. I encouraged them to use their questions to guide them in their search for information. When they felt overwhelmed, I pointed them back to their original questions: "These are the questions that you are trying to answer. What does the author have to say about them?" I encouraged the students to dialogue with the authors. If they disagreed, they should say so and explain why. If the author's words rang true for them, they should offer reasons.

Often books were insufficient. Students investigating cultural traditions interviewed elders. One student decided to do a photo essay on his village and to interview members of his community to learn about ceremonies. Other students created surveys for the Ha:sañ student body. Still others watched documentaries to supplement their information.

Changes in Classroom Discourse

Before embarking on this inquiry-based project, I had no experience in Web design. I had used a tutorial a few times before we began the project and quickly realized that I didn't have time to become an "expert" or to really know what I was doing. I decided to rely on Shawn, the technology coordinator who was available during some class periods, and Keith, a student who is extremely Web-savvy, to teach the students and me with the hope that eventually the students would begin to teach one another.

We began the Web-design portion of the project with a demonstration by Keith. I asked him to put together a Web page beforehand and

then to show the class how he put it together, "like a cooking show." In his quiet, relaxed way, Keith showed the class the process, using an application that allowed the students to see what was happening on his computer. The class was silent, completely attentive to Keith's words and his manipulations on the screen. Because Keith could not attend all four classes, I had to do two demonstrations using his Web page (and what I had learned from his demonstrations). The students were attentive but not nearly as much so as they had been for their peer.

While the students worked individually on their Web pages, I assisted those who asked for help or looked stuck. Eventually, students began to ask one another for help and even offer it when they saw someone struggling. Students helped each other with simple tasks, such as logging on to the system, but soon assisted with more complex tasks, such as modifying images. Only two students remained isolated because they were determined to "figure it out on [their] own." The rest of the students continued to teach one another and me. One class period, I was trying to help Jason make a picture his background image. Amanda—a student who quickly became a resource for all of us—looked over and said, "You don't have to do that; you can just go to Page Properties and choose a background image." Because of what she taught me, I was able to teach other students. The direction of instruction was no longer just from Shawn or me to the students but also between students and from the students to me.



Photograph by Heather Brown.

Instruction also changed outside of the computer lab, when students were working on their research in the classroom. Students began asking each other questions about their projects. They asked for help with understanding a word or passage: “What does *synonymous* mean?” They asked for clarification after reading a passage: “Why do these girls binge and purge?” When writing, they asked each other how to spell words and how to express their thoughts. They read drafts to one another. They shared interesting information, as when Lynne exclaimed, “Christina, look at this! It’s scary and interesting,” in researching

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the puberty ceremonies of the Tohono O’odham and when Amanda shared with Keith the research she found about racial stereotyping in people’s judgments of rap lyrics. They asked about the progress of each other’s research, as when Dan asked Lynne and Christina, “What have you found out about the ceremonies?” I also saw students thinking critically, asking each other questions that did not have simple answers. In one class, four girls were reading sections of Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth*. After discussing eating disorders, Sara asked the other group members, “Why don’t guys feel like this?” Much of the increased collaboration and discussion grew from the level of engagement the students had with the project.

Changes in Motivation and Engagement

One of the most significant changes I observed was the level of student engagement and subsequent increase in motivation. Other teachers noticed this as well. At Ha:sañ, there is an hour block called Academic Support, where the students work on assignments and receive help from a teacher. In general, but especially toward the end of the year, it requires a great deal of teacher prompting to get students to use this time well. When it came to working on the research project, however, this was not the case. One teacher complained, “Mark will only work on the project. Every day, he’s been on it since you started.” She shared, “I didn’t want [the students] to go to the computer lab because I knew [they] had other work to do and that they would only work on the project.” The technology coordinator, who is in the lab during this period, noted that students would

come in to work on the project without his having to prod them to get to work. “They just did it,” he said incredulously.

In the classroom, students who usually needed reminders to get on task no longer needed them. Two students in particular—Lance and Elena—had previously done little to nothing during class. Although I tried many approaches, I could not find a way to get them interested. Both had problems with attendance. After we began the research project, their attendance—and their attitudes—improved. Elena shared, “I think it’s the best project so far because it interested me the most.” Brian and Jim, two special education students with extremely low literacy skills, also surprised me. Brian began the project by sharing, “I hate computers!” I negotiated with him, offering to let him do an alternative assignment. But he refused, eventually becoming excited about the project. He put original artwork on his Web page as well as music files, an advanced feature that Jim had shown him. Jim, who has higher skills but who often lacks motivation, also became excited about the project, staying after school to work on it and eventually creating a clean, polished product that I felt proud to share with the staff.

Overall, the majority of the students enjoyed the project. Of sixty-six students surveyed, only five had negative feelings, mostly because they felt uncomfortable with the technology. One student said he didn’t know how he felt about it, and sixty students (91%) had positive comments. Nadine explained her reasoning: “I liked it. It helped me express myself a lot better and for people to get to know where I come from.”

The motivation and engagement were not just a result of the Web design but the nature of the research as well. The history teacher shared with me, “They’re really into it. They were finished with the assignment [I gave them] and they pulled out their articles for your class and started taking notes.” She said this with a tone of amazement, having co-taught with me the year before, when getting students to research was like pushing a boulder uphill. I, too, was excited by these changes, as I described in my journal: “This is amazing! Music plays in the background. Students are reading and taking notes. I hardly have to remind anyone to get on task. The biggest problem is kids getting so into reading that they forget to take notes. Even Elena is absorbed in her book!”



Photograph by Heather Brown.

Critical Thinking and Self-Confidence

While researching, some of the students began to realize that they knew more than the information provided in the books. This was often the case with students who were researching aspects of Tohono O'odham culture. The books were written by anthropologists who had interviewed elders, some of whom might have been from the same village as a student or even might have been a relative. Vanessa asked, "If I know about the ceremonies, can I write about what I know?" She wrote from her experiences and supplemented her research by interviewing an elder.

Naire investigated traditional Tohono O'odham medicine. After reading a master's thesis on the topic, she shared, "I thought it was disrespectful to ask these things." Students began to dialogue with the text, to question the authority of the author. They realized that they, too, knew about the subject.

One class period, I found Charlotte sitting with a blank sheet of paper in front of her for quite some time. "Charlotte," I asked, "why haven't you written anything? We need to start our drafts."

"I left my notes at home," she replied.

"Well, then, write what you know, and you can use your notes later for additional information."

She said she didn't know anything. I asked her if she had ever participated in a ceremony. She replied that she had. "So write about it. Describe it.

What is the purpose of the ceremony?" At the end of class, she had filled two pages with a vivid and informative description of the Tohono O'odham wine-making ceremony.

I saw students gain confidence not only in what they knew and could do but also in areas where they had felt insecure before. Jared told me in an interview that computers "weren't his thing" and that he did not feel comfortable with them. When his research on a ceremony became a more holistic look at his village, I suggested he take home a digital camera and take pictures of various places and shrines. He hesitated, explaining that he didn't feel comfortable using the camera. I encouraged him and finally persuaded him to take it home. A few weeks later in class, after finishing a writing conference with me, he asked, "Can I just do this on the computer?"

The students are not the only ones who have recognized strengths in themselves. I gained the strength to let go. My classroom was not utter chaos; I still facilitated the learning process, but I was no longer completely in control of the curriculum. I began to share the classroom with the students as we learned together and taught each other. As Shor states, "teachers may have to 'let go' . . . in . . . class, by learning the material in front of the students, with the students. This by itself signals a creative moment, that knowledge is happening right there. The teacher validates creative learning by learning creatively in-process" (Shor and Freire 88). By learning with my students, I provided a space for them to explore what truly interested them, increasing their enthusiasm to learn precisely what I had failed to teach them the previous year.

Inquiry-Based Learning Transforms the Classroom

When the students began their research, many of their chosen topics were not entirely familiar to me. Rather than being a detriment, learning with the students changed the discourse and dynamics of the classroom. It helped foster an environment of excitement and engagement. It helped to change the way the students looked at themselves as well as the way I saw myself as a teacher.

Freire states, "Liberatory education is fundamentally a situation where the teacher and the

students *both* have to be learners, *both* have to be cognitive subjects, in spite of being different” (Shor and Freire 33; italics in original). My inquiry-based research influenced the students’ learning processes.

In short, this approach freed me to teach and to reflect. It helped to change the way I saw myself as a teacher and how the students saw themselves.

By walking into the unknown, I encouraged them to do the same. By conducting research, I was able to share with them ways of gathering data that went beyond text-based research. They created surveys and conducted interviews. They saw their thoughts validated or challenged. We all pushed to find answers.

This level of engagement can be tied to the real audience that the Web page provided. They had a purpose for their research; they were going to communicate with other people. They also had choice in their topics; they were free to investigate real issues in their communities, real aspects of their culture. This helped to foster the intrinsic motivation that I—and other teachers—witnessed in the students.

The more engaged the students became, the more time I had to observe them and to assess their learning. I could design minilessons based on these observations (e.g., using an index or learning how to create parenthetical citations). I was able to talk one-on-one with students, answering their questions and posing questions that would guide them in their research. I engaged in writing conferences, recommended texts or other research methods, and showed students how to use survey data or interpret a statistic. In short, this approach freed me to teach and to reflect. It helped to change the way I saw myself as a teacher and how the students saw themselves.

The students, who had become accustomed to passive learning, became active learners. The oppor-

tunity to explore their cultures and communities helped them to see themselves, each other, and community members as authorities. They gained confidence to question the validity of texts and to formulate and share their ideas with the broader audience that the Web page provided. While it is difficult to measure how their projects affected their communities, the project has effected change in the classroom and has given them opportunities to prepare for future leadership positions.

The students became my teachers and influenced my theory of learning. When I began the research project the year before, I based my curriculum on many assumptions. As teachers, we often make assumptions about our students because of their ethnicity, cultural background, or age. These assumptions can affect our curricular decisions, approaches, and even relationships with students. My research has taught me to ask questions of myself and of my students. It has allowed me to make the classroom less *mine* and more *ours*. Inquiry-based learning has helped me to let go, to invite student input in curricular decisions. Although seemingly small, the change has been revolutionary.

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